COURT FINDS "SLOVENLY ENGINE-ROOM": BUT NOT CAUSE OF SHIP'S LOSS
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But not cause of ship's loss

The Court of Inquiry into the abandoning and loss of the British motor-vessel Forresbank (5,155 tons) states in its findings, published yesterday, that the evidence revealed a "number of lapses on the part of certain officers from the high standards which ought to be maintained in the Merchant Navy."

The Court says that the engine-room was managed in a slovenly fashion. It was unable to find, however, that any lapses amounted to a wrongful act or default, causing or contributing to the loss of the vessel. The loss is found to have been due to a "disastrous fire" in the engine-room on November 9, 1958, during a voyage from Capetown to Durban.

The Forresbank, owned by the Bank Line, Limited, of Glasgow, was "justifiably abandoned." One member of her crew of 55 died.

The investigation was conducted in July by the Wreck Commissioner, Mr J. Rowland Adams, Q.C., who sat with two assessors, Captain J E. Cooper and Mr Ivor J. Gray. They state in their first findings that, from the moment of its detection, the fire was beyond any means of control available to those on board and the master ordered the vessel to be abandoned some two hours later.

Small fire earlier

A small fire broke out in the engine room on November 6 and was rapidly put out.

"The Court has to try to place itself in the position of men who have experienced a minor fire easily extinguishable, the cause of which they thought they knew and understood So viewed, the matter calls for leniency in judgment"

At the same time the Court believed that a higher standard of discipline, vigilance, and alertness might have led to such an examination of the causes of the first fire as to lead to the discovery of the state of affairs which was later revealed and which the Court was satisfied was the cause of the major disaster.

"The engine-room of this vessel was, without question, managed in a slack and slovenly fashion. The evidence bristles with justification for this criticism. Although the uncertificated engineer officers showed human qualities of a high order in some respects and were no doubt doing their best to 'work up' an old and perhaps rather heart-breaking engine-room, they lacked the authority and the personality to overcome the poor tone and low standard set by the chief engineer [Mr John McIntyre Maclachlan]."

The Court expressed admiration of the "humanity, courage, and devotion to duty" of two engineers, Mr R. C. F. Brownlie and Mr R. W. Paul. These two young officers were in grave danger of being overcome by the heat and smoke in the engine-room and did all that men could do to try to save donkeyman Assad Ali.

The Court thought that considerable overflowing from the port settling tank had occurred before Mr Brownlie stopped the fuel oil transfer pump and that a fire, which might have started as a small one like that on November 6, increased through the ignition of the considerable quantity of oil which must have been in the save-all tray, leading in degrees to combustion of the oil in the tank itself.

Main factor

It was difficult in the circumstances to pass judgment upon any person or persons in respect of what the Court believed to have been the most important single factor leading to the calamity—the opening in the top of the port settling tank caused by the removal of the covering plate.

"In the opinion of the Court, when the chief engineer knows that a tank of this sort has had to be opened up for any purpose, the proper practice is for a complete examination of the tank by the ship's engineers to be made before it is put back into service. Unfortunately, in this case, it is impossible to discover when this covering plate was removed."

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